

What's in a Name?

Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO

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Exodus 20:7

Do not use the Lord your God's name as if it were of no significance; the Lord won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

Before last week, I associated the name "Anne Lamott" with various other women writers on Christian topics. Many of my seminary and clergy peers mention her, quote her from time to time, and Pastor Chuck preached a sermon series on her book on prayer titled *Help. Thanks. Wow.* However, I had never actually read any of her books myself. I didn't know anything about who she was, why she writes, or really what she writes about. Her name meant *something* to me, but that "something" wasn't actually very meaningful. Until I met her.

We were a group of 27 young clergy, 7 mentor clergy, Anne Lamott, and Anne Lamott's pastor, Rev. Veronica Goines. I was in the last minivan of folks that pulled up to the church, and we parked right next to where Anne was getting some things out of her car – a Subaru Outback that fits in San Francisco just as much as it fits in Colorado. We piled out of the car, and she greeted us casually as she continued to get the last things out of the car and close it up. We all walked together towards the small church together, chatting as we went.

Eventually all 36 of us settled down into the chairs that we had pulled into a circle, and Anne Lamott, or Annie, as we came to know her, just started talking. It didn't feel like she was speaking *to us*; it felt like she was having a *conversation* with us, and it just happened that her part in the conversation lasted for about 20 minutes, then another 15 after one question was asked.

I heard her story for the first time in that conversation, though anyone who has read any of her books before knows it well. She described herself openly as an addict – an addict to anything and everything that would provide "mood alteration." Alcohol, drugs, sex, and texting, and people-pleasing. She eventually came to believe in God, and the depth of her spirituality is embedded in the books that she has written and the words that she spoke to us last Tuesday.

At the end of our time with her, it did not feel particularly like I had learned anything revolutionary or life-changing from her, or even like I had just sat down with one of the greatest spiritual thinkers of today. It didn't feel disappointing, exactly, but there was a feeling of, "that's it?" I didn't realize how much I'd actually gained from our conversation with her until I realized over the next few days that my thoughts and my conversations with my peers all kept coming back to words and phrases that Annie had used – things that I had written down while she talked, and things that kept coming up again everywhere I turned. Phrases like: "'Figure it out' is not one of our slogans. Showing up is. We show up for each other." And statements like "You are loved and chosen" – the sentence that she says to each child she teaches in Sunday School each week. Ideas like mood-alteration – cravings that sometimes need the snap of a rubber band against the skin to redirect me away from an unhealthy giving in. Practices in the church like remembering not to hassle people. Telling visitors that if this isn't your place, or you don't live in town, we can help you find somewhere else. We don't need you to pick us. But we have found the way, we have found the truth.

Annie Lamott is an extraordinary person. And now, I have the *truth* of her to go along with her name. Not simply because I met her, but because she shared *who she is* with us.

The third commandment, most commonly known as "Don't take the Lord's name in vain." The way the translation we're using this morning says it – Don't use the Lord's name as if it had no significance.

While we think about that commandment, think about your own name. Think about what you want it to be associated with. What would it mean for someone to use your name wrongly, or for someone to tarnish your name? Or, what would it mean for someone to know the *truth* of your name, as I learned by knowing the truth of Annie Lamott's name because she shared herself, her story, with us?

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain." I would bet that most of us here have a fairly simple understanding of what that means – don't use God's name as if it were a curse-word, right? Or, don't use it if you're not actually calling on God. That understanding makes it pretty easy to teach to kids, and to point out to teenagers or anyone else who uses "Jesus Christ" or

“God damn it” to show their displeasure with a situation that they are breaking the third commandment – “Don’t use the Lord’s name in vain!” – as I sometimes heard from my grandmother when I was young and would use the word “God” to whine about something.

And yet, in this sermon series on looking more closely at the 10 Commandments, we have to ask whether that understanding is what the Third Commandment *really* means.

To show my cards ahead of time...I hope that you get out of today’s sermon *another* way of understanding this commandment, and I hope that it helps you to take more seriously the words you use and the actions you take based on them.

“Don’t use the Lord’s name as if it had no significance.” Well, why not? What’s in a name? This cultural question comes from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, when Juliet asks “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” True? Well, a rose does, in fact, go by many other names. (*slide – list of “rose” in other languages*) In many languages, the word for rose is similar. In many it is not. Do they signify the same thing?

Similarly, God does not go by “God” in other languages (*slide – ‘God’ in other languages*). In Spanish, God goes by “Dios.” In Malay, “Tuhan.” In Zulu, “Nkos.”

Of course, “God” is not actually a name. It’s a generic word for any and all deities that became a proper noun when Christians started using it as such for a Monotheistic religion that was trying to avoid using the *other* understood name of the Hebrew God - Yahweh. Or, YHWH.

Ok, now we need to learn something about these four letters. Are you paying attention? I want you to remember this, because I bet some of the things you’ve heard about it before are wrong.

This name for God, Yahweh, is only one of several names that are in the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. It is the one most often used, at 6,823 times.

I have heard people say that it does not have any vowels because it was meant to be unpronounceable, because it was too sacred to be said out loud. THAT IS NOT TRUE. It does not have any vowels because the WRITTEN HEBREW LANGUAGE DOES NOT HAVE ANY VOWELS. None of it. In early Judaism, Jews said this word. And then, at some point between the Ten Commandments and the time of Jesus, maybe as late as the 3rd century BCE, mainline Judaism

began to believe that it shouldn't be spoken, and they stopped. And then, because of the lack of vowels, later generations did not know how to pronounce it. "Yahweh" is the best educated guess based on writings from other languages in the Jewish timeframe.¹

So what did this name for God *mean*?

As the Jewish Encyclopedia has it: "Like other Hebrew proper names, the name of God is more than a mere distinguishing title. It represents the Hebrew conception of the divine nature or character and of the relation of God to His people. It represents the Deity as He is known to His worshipers, and stands for all those attributes which He bears in relation to them and which are revealed to them through His activity on their behalf. A new manifestation of His interest or care may give rise to a new name. So, also, an old name may acquire new content and significance through new and varied experience of these sacred relations."²

The literal meaning of YHWH, in the masculine form of the word, is "He is," or "He will be," or even "He lives." Its base word is simply "to be." In other words, Yahweh is the *living* God, as opposed to the lifeless gods of the Egyptians or of the peoples to whom the Israelites would later be living among, the Canaanites.

"God" may not be the formal, personal name that was first known for the God of the Israelites, but we have come to use it as such. We have given the name "God" reverence over time, and though we use it both casually and reverently, it is the main signifier that we have as English-speaking Christians.

We use "God" to signify everything that God means for us individually and corporately. We use other symbols to better emphasize other characteristics that have become important symbols for our Living God – God as Shepherd, God as Father, God as Creator, God as protective Mother. We use these words and signifiers because they represent a *relationship* between us and God.

God's name is important to us.

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11305-names-of-god>

² *Ibid.*

But some hear the name “God” and it does not have the same meaning for them. *The relationship that it portrays to them is one of abuse rather than protection.* They hear it in the context of “God damn it,” they hear it in the context of “God-given rights” that somehow seem to benefit only a relative few. They hear it in the context of “God says that you’re not good enough to be Christian,” they hear it in the context of “God doesn’t like who you are.” In these contexts, the name “God” is still imbued with meaning, but it may not be the meaning that the *Living God* would choose. In fact, in those contexts, the name “God” is more aligned with death – with a human’s limitation on love, with a small, boxed and packaged and sealed, human understanding of what’s of God and what’s not.

Does it hurt Christianity to use the names “God” or “Jesus Christ” as swear words? Maybe, a little. But that doesn’t hurt it as much as Christians use the name of God to support racism and prejudice. It doesn’t hurt it as much as the name of God in ways that limit the awesome, eternal, ever-transformative, ever-creating power of God, of Yahweh, the god who LIVES.

I think Anne Lamott would agree with me (and hopefully I’m not abusing her name by saying so...). I think that Anne Lamott, a woman who calls herself “addict”, would say, as she says to each child in the Sunday School that she teaches, that God’s “name” means that *you*, whoever and whatever you are, are loved and chosen.

Do not use God’s name to limit God – to abuse others, to keep anyone out. Use God’s name to speak the limitless power of the Living One in all things. To pronounce to anyone and everyone that they are loved and chosen.

Amen.